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LEARNING THROUGH CREATIVE DRAMATICS.

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PUB DATE OCT 60

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC NOT AVAILABLE FROM EDRS. 6P.

DESCRIPTORS- *CREATIVE DRAMATICS, *DRAMATIC PLAY, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, ELEMENTARY EDUCATION, SECONDARY EDUCATION, TEACHING METHODS,

THROUGH INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP EXPERIENCES IN CREATIVE DRAMATICS, CHILDREN CAN DEVELOP SELF-REALIZATION AS THEY BECOME INVOLVED IN THINKING, FEELING, AND EXPERIENCING. CREATIVE DRAMA AFFORDS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CONSTRUCTIVE CHANNELING OF EMOTIONS, DEVELOPS APPRECIATION OF THE WONDERS AND BEAUTY OF THE WORLD, PROMOTES THE ACQUISITION AND RETENTION OF KNOWLEDGE, AND HELPS THE CHILD RELATE TO THE WORLD ABOUT HIM. MOREOVER, THE DRAMATIZATION OF WORTHWHILE MATERIAL THROUGH PANTOMIME OR PLAY-ACTING PROVIDES THE CHILD WITH THE HUMAN EXPERIENCES OF OTHERS AND PROMOTES THE CAPACITY FOR COPING WITH PROBLEMS AND FEELINGS. THIS ACTIVITY IS PARTICULARLY HELPFUL WITH SLOW READERS BECAUSE, IN DRAMATIZING THE WRITTEN WORD, THEY ARE LED TO A GREATER INTEREST IN READING ITSELF. NECESSARY, HOWEVER, IS A CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE WHICH ALLOWS FOR CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND SPONTANEOUS DRAMATIZATION. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP," VOL. 18 (OCTOBER 1960), 19-23, 32.) (DL)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP, October 1960

LEARNING THROUGH CREATIVE DRAMATICS

by
Margaret S. Woods

"I have learned that the head does not hear anything until the heart has listened, and that what the heart knows today the head will understand tomorrow."[1]

Realization of maximum individual potential is possible through one of the most natural but neglected avenues of learning. Through individual, group and small group experiences in creative dramatics, described by Dienesch[2] as improvised activity in which the child creates his own forms, full self-realization develops as the child becomes involved in thinking, feeling and experiencing.

Quality human experiences should be carefully planned by a teacher proficient in knowledge of growth and development of the individual and skilled in techniques of dramatic art. Such experiences help the child develop awareness of purposeful living and promote self-initiated activity. They also enable the child to manage the events which occur within his culture and result in his ever-increasing movement toward balanced intellectual, physical, social, emotional and spiritual growth.

In all types of creative drama there are opportunities to experience a variety of situations and roles. Such opportunity provides constructive channeling of emotions, promotes acquisition and retention of knowledge, develops appreciation of the wonders and beauty of the world, and helps the child relate himself to the world about him through a form uniquely his. Dienesch[3] believes that, whether the dramatic creation be spontaneous or elaborate, elementary or complex, it is by making a work of art, in his own way and according to his own capacity that the child or adolescent develops most fully and harmoniously.

One aspect of creative drama included in make-believe of the child, is dramatic play which is spontaneous activity full of adventure and discovery.[4] No suggestions are needed, for "trying on life" and playing out thoughts and feelings, for dramatic play are the child's means of enjoying, exploring, testing, releasing, remembering, working. The pilot flying the jet, the puppy playing with the ball, or Mother washing dishes, exists as the creation of the moment which Slade[5] indicates is the joy of dramatic play.

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[1]James Stephens. The Crock of Gold. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960.

[2]Marie Dienesch. "Creative and Formal Dramatics." World Theatre. Vol. II, No. 3, 1951. p. 30.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Winifred Ward. Playmaking with Children. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957. p. 10.

[5]Peter Slade. Child Drama. London: University of London Press, Ltd., 1954. p. 45.

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The oldest form of dramatic expression is pantomine, a means of communication which knows no national barriers. Through large muscle activity, rhythmically expressed through the elephant swinging his trunk, the stealthy approach of the men, swinging aboard the ship during the Boston Tea Party, the delicate rhythmic movement involved in signing the Declaration of Independence, the exacting stitches taken with care in making the first flag, all communicate thought and feeling through movement, which Siks[6] indicates in basic in the art of drama.

When a group of children make a story come alive by playing it spontaneously, whether it is original or taken from literature, history or current happening, they are having an experience in story dramatization, which differs from dramatic play because of plot.[7] Although considered by some as "drama for drama's sake," creative dramatics can be integrated with subject matter without losing the art quality since, according to Lee and Lee,[8] stories related to topics being dealt with in other subject areas can be utilized. Here the values of creative dramatics can be achieved while deeper understandings in other learnings are also being developed.

Personal Involvement

Learning experiences built around personal involvement through creative drama, can enhance acquisition and retention of new facts and stimulate desire to do research. A display of china plates designed by the children decorated the chalk-lined shelves on the blackboard in one third grade classroom. As a result of experiencing sensitivity to the beauty of china during the dramatization of "The Little Blue Dishes," children displayed the sets with great pride to teachers and children in the school. Price lists indicating cost per piece, per place setting, settings of four, six, eight and even twelve enabled children to practice the multiplication table as children placed orders.

Probably a longing to give one's best, and to succeed, effectively communicated by one demonstrating teacher, inspired at least one child to do research and to learn to read. David knew he would have to repeat the fifth grade because he had not been interested in or able to read. However, he had a keen desire to be Tom Sawyer in the playing of the whitewashing scene from the Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Because he insisted, "I've always wanted to be Tom," the teacher finally chose David rather than another highly capable boy in the group. Throughout the play, Tom had difficulty making decisions, but he made them with all the courage he could summon.

Following the play an evaluation was made, "What did you like best about the play?" Many positive comments resulted with suggestions for improvement. Hurrying up to the teacher as the other boys and girls were leaving, David, eyes sparkling, asked, "How did I do?"

"How do you think you did David?"

"Well, you know, if I had a chance to do it again, I could do it a lot better,"

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[6]Geraldine Brain Siks. Creative Dramatics: An Art for Children. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958. p. 105.

[7]Ward, op. cit., p. 10.

[8]J. Murray Lee and Dorris May Lee. The Child and His Curriculum. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960. p. 522.

"You know, David, I too did something for the first time this morning and when I repeat it, I'll do it a lot better. But tell me, what will you do to improve your playing?" The teacher then discussed with David the strong points and possibilities for improvement on a subsequent occasion.

The following day, David's mother revealed the boy's sudden renewed interest in reading. "Mom, could we stop and buy the book of Tom Sawyer? You know, I never have read that book all the way through. I want to see if Tom could reach the top board as easy as I could."

Through continued effort in providing opportunities for story dramatization, David was able to assume roles which helped him to build courage and confidence, a desire to do research and to understand words. Like others, David felt the satisfaction that comes when one struggles with a new idea, taking out the truth, sticking to it, being responsible for his own actions and successfully solving a problem. Empathy with human experiences of the ages, truths inherent in great works of literature, art, music, develop understanding, as Anderson[9] indicates:

> A child's first act of creativity is to get in relation symbolically to something or somebody outside himself. This will appear as language as soon as play, for in play the child begins the never-ending struggle to understand both his world and the world as conceived by others.

It is not always necessary to dramatize a story. Through pantomimic activity, students in one Spanish class improvised situations involving specific characters of the present and past through the game, "?Quien soy?" The spontaneity with which students responded brought forth a need for new word combinations, knowledge of verb tenses, ability to think on one's feet. Questions such as "?Esta Vd. en los Estados Unidos?. . . ?Esta Vd. en TV? . . . ?Vive Vd?" placed the entire responsibility of identifying the characterization through questions asked in Spanish. As a result, discipline problems began to disappear, for the need to know was ever present.

Life Cycle

The joy of creating develops a capacity to approximate intellectual and emotional heights. As the child creates, he lives fully and richly the character which seems so real to him.

An understanding of the life cycle became most meaningful in one first grade room in an experience with maple wings. These wings snuggle under the "dirt blanket" to rest until Spring whispers, "It's time to grow." One day Susan commented, "We're going to have a new baby at our house, and I get to name it Judy or Jim." The teacher aroused the curiosity of the group with the statement, "Isn't it nice that Susan is going to have a baby brother or sister at her house? But you know, I have something here in this box, something for each one of you. It has a tiny baby inside. It isn't exactly like Susan's baby brother or sister will be, but it is a tiny baby." Asking the children to close eyes and hold out hands, the teacher deposited a maple wing with each child. She then suggested that they touch, feel, think, wonder, about it. "How does yours feel to you?" she asked.

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[9]Harold H. Anderson, editor. Creativity and Its Cultivation. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959. p. 185.

"Mine is soft as fur."

"Mine isn't, it's like Daddy's face when he doesn't shave."

"Mine feels scratchy like my rusty handlebar."

"Well, if there's a baby in there, he doesn't even wiggle."

"Sure, it has to rest first so it can be strong enough to move." Silent thoughts indicated wonder about the baby closed up tight inside.

"Could it move if it wanted to?"

"Can I break it open and take it out?"

"No, Johnny, it will come out when the time is right. What will help?"

Answers from the children included, "Sun. . . wind. . . rain. . . a good, warm, dirt house."

The teacher then suggested, "Let's all snuggle down in our own warm dirt house. When the music tells you it's growing time, let the sun help you push your way out of the little house."

Thirty-two children, closing in as small as possible, responded slowly, sensitively to "Morning" by Grieg, in complete rhythmic unfloding, exploring, pushing up and out, each with a rhythm all his own, struggling to go beyond but with an inner harmony that results from giving one's all.

Evaluation by the children included such comments as, "I felt the warm sun on me, when I pushed up through the ground."

"I got a drink from the sprinkler."

"I saw one plant that was growing faster and faster into a tree so it could grow more seeds."

"My seed got warm just like when I pop popcorn and away I went clear up through the ground."

"I popped back quick into the dirt because I heard thunder," exclaimed one startled child.

The teacher encouraged real thoughts and feelings by asking, "What do you feel like doing when you hear thunder?

"It makes me feel like running and hiding in the closet."

"It makes me all hunched up, and I put my hands over my ears."

"You know, boys and girls, I used to be frightened by thunder until my daddy told my that it was just Station S K Y broadcasting."

A chorus of "What's that?" from the children indicated no recognition of the word, S K Y. "I'm going to let you find out. I hope you do before that station broadcasts again."

The following day, Tommy, who seemed to spend almost as much time in the principal's office as he did in his classroom, arrived early and was down on the floor with five books spread out in front of him when his teacher arrived. Since there was a rule that in that room no child could enter ahead of the teacher, he again made a visit to the principal's office.

"But I was only trying to find S K Y," he tearfully explained. "I looked in all my comic books at home but I couldn't find it, so I had to come early because it takes me so long to figure out words." The principal, with Tommy and five other first graders who had been unable to locate the station that broadcast thunder, borrowed a picture dictionary and discovered for themselves, a word which expressions on their faces indicated they should have known all the time.

A Climate for Creation

Dramatization of worthwhile material provides the child with quality human experiences and promotes capacity for coping with problems. A desire for more of the quality feeling and a willingness to struggle for it are evident when opportunity exists to feel the difference between order and chaos, love and hate, ridicule and praise, bravery and cowardice. For example, empathy with General Washington and his men at Valley Forge may bring renewed effort in coping with

failure, facing a problem, finding a means for successful solution. Such understanding may set greater forces in motion in the process of striving and becoming, ultimately equipping the child with wisdom and skill as he slowly but surely acquires responsibility for behavior.

The child discovers what life appears to be through participation in worthwhile experiences some of which exist only through participation in the art of creative dramatics. As Trevis[10] indicated, "Imagination is the faculty of forming images whereby the Soul beholdeth the Likeness of Things that be Absent." By tapping the individual's feelings through identification with things and people, one has reached a source of energy which can provide a most effective means for learning.

A climate conducive to constructive creative expression, whether it be in writing, painting, movement or dramatics, challenges the teacher. Although there is no one set of techniques, results can be achieved by acting upon suggestions of a number of educators.[11] However, it would seem that a climate which houses "enemies of creativity" is easier to identify, because remarks which place courage and confidence in the deepfreeze are clearly evident. Some such remarks include:

"It doesn't look like it to me."
"When you're older you'll understand."
"Why did you have to do that?"
"How many forgot their money again?"
"It's time for the Bluebirds to read."
"Those of you who miss more than five will have to stay in during recess."
"How did you happen to spill so much?"
"You'll have that next year - if you pass."
"Let's get back to our seats. We still have to finish the next page before the bell rings." (As the children gaze with awe and wonder at the first snowflakes of the season.)

Elimination of some of these "enemies of creativity" marks a beginning, for some teachers, of a desire to help children realize maximum potentialities by making way for constructive creative expression.

Participation in creative dramatics rewards not only the learner but the teacher as well: In reaching far below the surface for the child's best: in the struggle to provide situations which combat the stifling effects of mass culture; in removal of pressures which discourage appreciation of awareness of beauty, truth and goodness, so vital in the cultivation of taste; in the presentation of dramatic situations which build inner controls in discipline; in the joy of creating as one seeks to understand, appreciate and respect self and all mankind. Anderson[12] believes creativity as personality development is not only a product of openness in human relating; it is a further opening to higher levels of harmony in the universe.

If one would but lend an ear to those who learn through a dramatic approach to teaching, through the art of creative dramatics, one might hear in response to the question, "Why was it fun? such comments as these:

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[10]Florence Cane. The Artist in Each of Us. New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1951. p. 124.

[11]References at the close of the article.

[12] Anderson, op. cit., p. 141.

"Because I got to be President." (A fourth grade boy who, as General Washington, inspected the flag.)

"Because you can do the best you know how to do and nobody grumbles." (An eighth grade boy who had just appeared in the front of the room for the first time in six months.)

"Because I have a whole bucketful of new words." (A fifth grade girl who enjoyed contributing "picture words" for descriptions of characters in Rachel Field's poem, "Roads.")

"Because when you use your imagination, everything comes out all right." (A fifth grade boy who had become a pilot making a daring rescue on Mt. McKinley.)

"Because you seem to understand our needs." (A shy fifth grade girl who felt awe in sighting the tower in "Why the Chimes Rang.")

"Because you can be mean and not hurt anybody." (A fourth grade boy who enjoyed playing the role of the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk," but realized that the giant does not gain the respect of the players.)

"I've learned enough to last me for three days." (An eighteen year old student about to receive a certificate of attendance from a special school for slow learners.)

Through the art of creative dramatics, dreams and ambitions, attitudes and values, inner controls, aesthetic appreciation, sensitivity of spirit and a song in one's heart daily fill the learner's storehouse. Through identification with quality human experiences which help build rather than destroy, courage and confidence to go beyond that which is expected, wisdom and ability to respond effectively to change, develop on a high level through a dramatic process of thinking, feeling, experiencing, a process which affords the learner opportunity to achieve full self-realization in the world of tomorrow.

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